

# Elementary Concepts of Historical Materialism

## Chapter 5:

# Base and Superstructure

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1. *Infrastructure and Superstructure.* 2. *Superstructure: A Problematical Notion.* 3. *The Relations between Infrastructure and Superstructure.*

### 1. INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

In Chapters One through Four, we have studied the concepts which enable us to understand the economic structure of society. The detailed and rigorous study of this structure is fundamental, since by beginning with it we can understand the other levels of society.

Marx and Engels used the terms INFRASTRUCTURE or BASE for the economic structure of society, and SUPERSTRUCTURE for the juridico-political institutions, the State, the law, etc., and the "forms of social consciousness" which correspond to a determinant infrastructure.

In *Anti-Duhring*, Engels says:

... the economic structure of society always forms the real basis from which, in the last analysis, is to be explained the whole superstructure of legal and political institutions, as well as of the religious, philosophical, and other conceptions of each historical period. (1)

By means of the notions of infra- and superstructure, Marx and Engels expressed the relationship which exists between the economic level of society and the juridico-political and ideological ("forms of social consciousness") levels.

In the same manner that the foundation is the base on which a building is constructed, the economic structure is the base of the entire social edifice.

One of Marx and Engels' great contributions is the discovery that to study society we should not start with what human beings say, imagine, or think, but with the manner in which they produce the material goods they need for their lives.

It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers -- a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labor and thereby its social productivity -- which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. This does not prevent the same economic basis -- the same from the standpoint of its main conditions -- due to innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural environment, racial relations, external historical influences, etc., from showing infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances. (2)

The notion of SUPERSTRUCTURE designated, therefore, two levels of society: the juridico-political structure and the ideological structure. To the former corresponds the State and the law; to the latter the so-called "forms of social consciousness."

### 2. SUPERSTRUCTURE: A PROBLEMATICAL NOTION

That we have employed the term "notion" in speaking about the superstructure is no mere accident, but is owed to the fact that it has not been studied in a finished form by Marxists.



Can we say, for example, that everything that occurs in a society which does not pertain to the economic instance must be considered as a phenomenon belonging to the superstructure?

Stalin, in his article, "Concerning Marxism in Linguistics," affirms that language was a phenomenon that belonged neither to the superstructure nor to the base or infrastructure.

In a letter in which he refers to this article, he says:

Briefly, language cannot be ranked either among bases or among superstructures.

Neither can it be ranked among "intermediate" phenomena between the base and the superstructure, as such "intermediate" phenomena do not exist. (3)

At the same time, Althusser, in criticizing Gramsci, maintains that science is a phenomenon which cannot be ranked under the category of superstructure.

To make science a superstructure is to think of it as one of those "organic" ideologies which form such a close "bloc" with the structure that they have the same "history" as it does. (4)

If the concept of superstructure does not account for all extraeconomic phenomena, what should be the concept that does? This is a theoretical problem that Marxism has to resolve.

### 3. THE RELATIONS BETWEEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

According to Marxist theory, we must look to the infrastructure for the "guideline" to explain the social phenomena which belong to the superstructure. But this statement does not imply that everything is a reduction to or a simple reflection of economics.

Nevertheless, many texts of Marx and Engels lend themselves to this type of interpretation, due to the excessive emphasis which they give to the role which the economic structure plays within society.

We must ask ourselves, therefore, what led Marx and Engels to employ this excessive emphasis.

It is necessary to recall that, in the historical moment in which they wrote, there was a strong idealist current which attributed the cause of social phenomena to the will and the thought of man, deprecating the role of material existence. Even the most advanced thinkers such as the French and English materialists of the 17th and 18th Centuries and the German materialist Ludwig Feuerbach continued to maintain idealist principles when they tried to explain the phenomena of social existence, the history of societies.

Idealist theologians and philosophers, bourgeois sociologists and historians, all the ideologues of the feudal aristocracy and of the

grand and petty bourgeoisie saw in consciousness, reason, political, moral, and religious ideas the fundamental and determinant motor force of the development of society.

Let us see how Marx criticizes this idealism in a letter to Annenkov of December 28, 1846, in which he talks about Proudhon's book, *The Philosophy of Poverty*:

M. Proudhon sees in history a definite series of social developments; he finds progress realized in history.... He cannot explain these facts, and the hypothesis of the universal reason manifesting itself is made out of whole cloth. Nothing is easier than to invent mystical causes, that is to say, phrases which lack common sense. (5)

In order to combat positions of this type, Marx and Engels, in certain texts, went to the opposite extreme. These texts, taken out of their context and the ideological struggle in which they were written, have led to false interpretations.

For example, the following passage from *The German Ideology*:

... conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour.

And later, on the same page:

... morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. (6)

The uncritical, mechanical interpretation of texts such as these has given birth to a simplification of Marxism.

Certain Marxists, those whom Lenin called "vulgar Marxists," strain themselves to deduce directly from economy all the phenomena produced at the juridico-political and ideological level.

In the case of the ideology philosophy, for example, they try to deduce the concepts of matter and spirit from the social relations of production. The concept of matter would correspond to the proletariat (material labor) and the concept of spirit would correspond to the capitalists (the work of organization and administration which is not labor of a material type).

Lenin energetically rejected such over simplification, pointing out that these concepts were produced more than 2,000 years ago by philosophers who belonged to entirely different classes.

This same "vulgar Marxism" is found at the root of the errors committed by the Mensheviks in the period before the October Revolution. According to Lenin, they:

had learned from memory that the democratic revolution has as its base the bourgeois revolution and took this to mean that it was



necessary to reduce the democratic tasks of the proletariat to the level of bourgeois moderation.

What they could not see, given their economist deviation, was the fundamental role of the political aspect in the stage of transition, and for that reason they could not grasp the basic difference between a bourgeois democratic revolution carried out by the bourgeoisie and a democratic revolution of a new type, which is one that completes bourgeois-democratic tasks under the leadership of the proletariat and which has as its ultimate purpose the establishment of socialism. Those Marxists reduced society to its economic structure. They lost sight of the other levels, and what is much more serious, lost sight of the necessity to organize a vanguard party which is capable of leading a revolutionary transformation of society on the surest road to socialism and then to communism.

We should repeat for the vulgar Marxists the phrase from Engels' letter of January 25, 1894, to Starkenburg: that there does not exist "an automatic effect" of the economic situation. (7)

It is necessary to show them that if Marx and Engels did accentuate the economic side, it was owing to the nature of their adversaries. They had to "emphasize the main principle" denied by their adversaries and they "had not always the time, the place, or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction." (8)

Studying the political works of Marx and Engels is the clearest proof of the importance they attributed to the other levels of society, and above all to revolutionary action, the product of the class struggle.

With respect to the role of the economic level, Marx and Engels said the following:

... if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. (9)

Economic conditions are the "finally determinant" conditions, but the other instances of society also play a role:

Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic basis,... which ultimately always asserts itself. (10)

The elements of the superstructure are linked, directly or indirectly, to the changes taking place in the infrastructure, but they have a relative autonomy and their development is guided by specific laws.

Engels showed how the development of philosophy, for example, cannot be explained purely and simply from economic development:

The philosophy of every epoch, since it is a definite sphere in the division of labor, has

as its presupposition certain definite thought material handed down to it by its predecessors, from which it takes its start. And that is why economically backward countries can still play first fiddle in philosophy. (11)

We can say, therefore, that certain ideological elements can exist which are transmitted from one social formation to another, but that these elements are always put at the service of the interests of the dominant classes, for whom they serve as instruments of struggle. The radical transformation of the superstructure and its replacement by a new one does not exclude the continuation of some elements.

If the economic level mechanically determined the entire superstructure and the development of society, then Marx and Engels would have fallen into an absurd contradiction: to call for class struggle and revolution when everything would have already been predetermined by the economy.

This is one of the points most frequently repeated by the critics of Marxism. They take pleasure in pointing out the "logical incoherence" of Marxist theory. On one hand, the affirmation of determination by the economic level, and on the other, the affirmation of the necessity of human action in history. This criticism only reveals the ignorance or bad faith of those who formulate it. They deem to forget the radical difference between Marxist determination and mechanical determinism.

Engels wrote the following to Franz Mehring about this problem:

Hanging together with this is the fatuous notion of the ideologists that because we deny an independent historical development to the various ideological spheres which play a part in history we also deny them any *effect upon history*. The basis of this is the common undialectical conception of cause and effect as rigidly opposite poles, the total disregarding of interaction. These gentlemen often almost deliberately forget that once an historical element has been brought into the work by other, ultimately economic causes, it reacts, can react on its environment and even on the causes that have given rise to it. (12)

Unfortunately, Marx and Engels were not able to develop systematically and profoundly the problem of the determinism specific to Marxism.

Althusser says in this respect:

The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances, for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution. (13)

#### SUMMARY

The first part of this chapter, rather than developing the theme of the infra- and superstruc-



ture, is more a warning concerning the precarious state of Marxist investigation about what is meant by "superstructure." The second part tries to show that Marx and Engels never reduced the superstructure to the infrastructure. The juridico-political and ideological structures, which form part of the superstructure, have a relative autonomy in relation to the infrastructure and their own laws of operation and development.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by infrastructure and superstructure?
2. Why does the concept of superstructure require further elaboration?
3. What is the relationship between infra- and superstructure?
4. Why did Marx and Engels emphasize to such a great extent the role of the economy?
5. What is the difference between mechanistic determinism and Marxist determinism in general?

#### THEMES FOR REFLECTION

1. In what sense can we say that science depends on the economy; and in what sense can we say that it does not? How can we combine these two statements?
2. Is it possible to speak of superstructure in the case of the transition from capitalism to socialism, where the superstructure appears to be moving ahead of the economic structure?
3. How can the non-contradiction between Marxist economic determinism and "human action in history" be precisely formulated?

#### ENDNOTES

1. Frederick Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 41.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III (International, 1967), pp. 791-92.
3. Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and Linguistics* (International, 1951), p. 34.
4. Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* (Pantheon, 1970), p. 133.
5. Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Progress, 1965), p. 34.
6. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (International, 1939), p. 14.
7. *Selected Correspondence*, p. 467.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 418.
9. *Ibid.* p. 417.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 467.
11. *Ibid.* p. 424.
12. *Ibid.* p. 460.
13. *Reading Capital*, p. 187.

(continued from page 20)

4. Earl Browder, *The People's Front* (International Publishers, New York, 1938), pp. 235-248.
5. *Proceedings (Abridged) of the 16th National Convention of the Communist Party, USA* (New Century Publishers, New York, 1957), pp. 121-122.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 235-236.
10. *Marxism or Revisionism* (the Main Report to the National Conference of the Provisional Organizing Committee for a Communist Party, August 16-17, 1958), p. 1.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
12. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971), p. 13.
13. *Proceedings*, p. 165.
14. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New Left Books, London, 1977), p. 30.

